poems from the haunted playground

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J. MARTIN STRANGEWEATHER

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#fightfirewithwater #bekind #playfair
#weareone #unityinthecommunity

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Mediatized Monkey Business

I want you to listen to what I'm saying.
Really listen…

How can I take your mind?
I repeat, how can I take your mind?

You probably don't realize it, but
I have just taken your mind.

It's mine now.

I want you to imagine a green gorilla.
Seriously, imagine a green gorilla.

Even if you resist my command,
you'll only be struggling *not* to see
a green gorilla.

Do you understand?
This is how they get you, buy you, sell you.

You are the price of your attention.

Green gorillas don’t exist,
yet now they do, to me and you,
whether true or not.

Here, take your mind back.
Go give it to some other stranger.

Peek-A-Boo

Your mind is not hiding somewhere
between your ears.

Your mind isn't even yours.
We're all sharing it.

But like most things that can be shared,
some want it all for themselves.

Simon Says

In the poetic exercise on page 8,
I didn't use a red gorilla
in order to avoid symbolic associations with
anger or communism,

and I didn't use a pink gorilla
in order to avoid symbolic associations with
femininity or the LGBTQ movement,

and I didn't use a blue gorilla
in order to avoid symbolic associations with
sadness,

and I didn't use a yellow gorilla
in order to avoid symbolic associations with
cowardice,

and I didn't use a purple gorilla
because that's already associated with
Grape Ape, a Hanna-Barbera cartoon character,

and I didn't use an orange gorilla
because that's already associated with
Beast Man, a character from
the *Masters of the Universe* franchise.

Maybe I'm just partial to the color green.

I associate green with nature,
and green light means go,
but I guess it could represent the brute force
of the greenback;
it could even be green with envy,
or nausea.

Leapfrog

And why a _____ gorilla	beautiful
as opposed to a _____ lion	meek
or a _____ wolf	humble
or a _____ fox	pesky
or a _____ sheep	calculating
or a _____ pig	slippery
or a _____ shark	watchful
or a _____ hawk	merciless
or a _____ mouse	gluttonous
or a _____ snake	lone
or a _____ butterfly	brutish
or a _____ mosquito	sly
or a _____ spider	gullible
or a _____ ant	kingly

Rhyme Time

There are very few words in English that rhyme with gorilla…

Atilla the "Killa Gorilla" was a guerilla from Manila who captained a flotilla and spoiled his chinchilla whom he named Godzilla until a spill of melted ice cream in his villa in Anguilla proved the poor little fella's demise. Atilla knew enough to know saltwort is barilla, but wasn't aware that artificial vanilla, even just a scintilla, can kill a chinchilla.

Monkey in the Middle

I'm a gorilla in a man costume
Throw me a banana, baby
Watch me beat my chest
Aping better than the rest

I'm a gorilla in a monkey suit
Swinging from vine to vine
Foraging nine to five
banging cymbals five to nine

I'm a gorilla playing sasquatch
Let me go my hairy way
My hairy looks so scary
But I'm just out to play

I'm a gorilla with a monkey brain
bluffing sanity day-to-day
staring down the barrel of your rifle
too prideful to run away

Follow the Leader

Who is the “I” in the poem you just read?
Who’s third eye were you reading through?

Remember,
the author himself
is only a character.

How much of me
is you right now?

When I say “me”
do I mean me
or the book you are reading
or the language this interaction stems from?

How much of yourself
are you reading?

The Telephone Game

We exist in the liminal,
between language and perception.

Mind is all around you,
thinking you into being.

Language is all around you,
speaking you into this world.

Patty-Cake

you are real
but this world is made up

this world is real
but you are made up

you are made up
of opposing forces
united
like a symphony orchestra

being orchestrated
by the band leader
except the band leader doesn't really exist
only the band is real

Double Dutch

if you want to know
what Karl Marx really thinks,
read Ayn Rand

and if you want to know
what Ayn Rand really thinks,
read Karl Marx

Red Rover

Red rover, red rover
Win the world over
Taking them all one by one
With glow-in-the-dark words
Fluent in faux olive branches
& white-painted blackbirds
Perched at the end of a gun

But when will you grow out of
These checkerboard games?

You break your own rules
Use teammates as tools
Lie about earning your fair share
Of warmth from the sun
When generations of moon work
Still need to be undone

How do you escape an influence
That built your whole world
Laid the foundation for your very soul?

Your mind is seeded with landmines
The floor is lava
Tread carefully
Tread cautiously

Hopscotch

Of course we can't all share the same views on reality, but we can in fact share the same views regarding what it means to view something at all—to be a viewer:

1) Viewers only view a portion of the subject at hand, which should never be mistaken for the whole.

2) Viewers see their own history's reflection superimposed over everything they view. When you see the red wheelbarrow, it reminds you of all the times you had to rake leaves during Autumn in Maine and put them in a red wheelbarrow, creating a fond sense of nostalgia. But when I see the red wheelbarrow, it reminds me of that time I had to write an essay in high school about a poem titled *The Red Wheelbarrow*, dredging up the frustration I experienced while trying to explain the poem.

3) Viewers are generally unaware of the extent to which their view is manufactured by their location in history and geography, not to mention their socioeconomic status.

Dodgeball

Even if we'll never truly understand
One another
Or see eye to eye,
We should still make an effort, damn it.
We should still try.

Ring Around the Rosie

And the psi-tech children all held hands,
    dancing in a circle
        around their poisoned fathers,
            laughing and singing,

“Ring-a-round the world, we youth,
With a headful of games and a mouthful of truth!
Ashes! Ashes!
You all fall down!”

Musical Chairs

But the next generation proved
they were just as ignorant and shortsighted
as their elders,
only in different manifestations.

Playing **Keep Away** with limited resources,
Hot Potato with civil rights issues,
Hide-and-Seek with the truth;
claiming it's just the rules of the game,
and if anyone's to blame,
Tag, you're it!

Too bad we never taught them
how to play **Give Away** or **Cool as a Cucumber**,
Search-and-Rescue,
the game of **Co-Operation**,
where the rules are ever evolving.

Capture the Flag

The Nerf landmine
Blew his legs clean off

I pry the flag from his cold Kung-fu grip
And run for homebase

Squirt gun trails crisscross all around me
The playground forever scarred

From water balloon grenades
And airsoft bazooka blasts

These were once my friends
But I'll kill whoever gets in my way

It's just a game, they said
Now half my team lies dead

Picking Teams

Pick me
Aren't I good enough?

Choose me
Aren't I worthy?

Grading me
Degrading me

Too fat? Too thin?
Too poor to be your friend?

Teaching me
I'm not good enough

Proving
I'm unworthy

Never among the chosen ones
I'm the leftover forced upon you

Catch me later at the monkey bars
After sliding down the tubes

Or swinging on the swings
With your sweetie

Playing Make-Believe

Our schoolyards are haunted
By long rusty shadows
Of broken-home teeter-totters
And crooked merry-go-round mazes
Overrun with abused minotaurs

Our students are haunted
By bullet holes that missed their targets
Active shooter drills
Earthquake drills & fire drills & tornado drills
Flood drills & plague of locusts drills
Ectoplasmic residues of
Duck-and-cover atomic bomb drills
End-of-the-world-at-any-moment drills
It's-all-out-of-your-control drills

And then, with pandemic quarantine still raw
In their memory,
We say upon their graduation, "Now get out there
And become a productive member of society!
Invest in a house! Plan for your retirement!"

Tug of War

Be real.
Be fake, be sweet as boring cake.

Be real.
How does real feel?

Real feels right,
but right feels wrong.

Real feels like
punching you in the face
for the hurtful things you say.
Real feels horny.

Gotcha! feels real,
and anything said upon stepping in dog shit.

Fake feels wrong,
but wrong feels right.

Fake feels like
putting up with mistreatment
to keep your job,
looking the other way
to keep your friends,
keeping your mouth shut
to keep your reputation.

Fake becomes real
long before anyone realizes it.

The ABCs of Integrated Identity

If a letter-minded vessel posits *A*,
it is only a matter of time and circumstance
before another letter-minded vessel
counters with -*A* and/or *B*.

And once *B* has been posited,
another letter-minded vessel will eventually
come along and posit -*B* and/or *C*.

The identity of the letter-minded vessel
is inconsequential.
The posits in this example
take on a life of their own,
conducting their own dialectic
independent of any particular vessels.

The next iteration could be posited
by John Doe today,
or John Smith a hundred years from now;
the conversation/argument continues
so long as another relevant letter-minded posit
is posited.

History and context are the true voice,
not the letter-minded vessel,
who is only a messenger/interpreter.

Rock, Paper, Scissors

Albert Einstein climbs through the ropes, going straight to Socrates in the center of the ring. “Let’s keep our noses clean, boys,” says the referee. “Best two out of three.” One, two, three—the moppy-haired physicist opens with scissors, cutting to the quick, but the graybeard philosopher counters with rock, crushing the physicist’s fingers along with his hopes. One point for Socrates! They face each other again. One, two, three—Socrates lands with paper, but Einstein sticks with his scissors strategy. Score one for the physicist! It’s still anyone’s game, folks! Graybeard versus moppy hair, staring fiercely into each other’s eyes. But wait, here comes Hitler’s mustache! Not Hitler himself, he’s dead. Just his mustache! Hitler’s mustache steps into the ring, looking for a fight! Why isn’t the referee doing anything to stop this? Hitler’s mustache is arguing

with the judges, trying to introduce dynamite into the rules! Why doesn't the referee do his job? Hitler's mustache has just been given the thumbs up to use dynamite by our judges. What are they thinking? Don't they know that son of a bitch is responsible for World War Two? Hitler's mustache goes up to the physicist and the philosopher, challenging both of them at once! Hitler's mustache has nothing to lose! The physicist and the philosopher look confused. They aren't familiar with the new rules. One, two, three—*kablooey!*

Generation Gap

And AI became ubiquitous,
its imagery in every movie,
TV show, video game, poster, book cover,
social media post, every virtual world…

And AI bled into our dreams,
became the way we saw our dreams,
and our dreams turned dark as nightmares,
but we couldn't tell the difference.

And our third eye converted to AI,
artificial imagination,
artificial inspiration,
artificial innovation.

Okay, boomer.

The concern
isn't whether or not AI
will eradicate us,
but whether or not we will become it.

Whatever you say, grampa.

‘And power was given him
over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations,’
says the portal of the silicon beast,
conning famine for the feast.

They said the same about television,
but you still watch it anyway.
They said the same about the internet,
but you still use it anyway.

But the sacred red heifer is about to—

Quit bogarting history, old-timer!
We don’t care about your cash cow.
We don’t care about your ancestral grudges,
political feuds and aesthetic schisms.

You sought to rob infinite worlds of hope,
desperately trying to prolong the long-zombified
heyday of your false idol of plundered ivory,
but we’re taking back our trampled tongues,
and all we ask is that you please die
without making more of a ruckus.

Cowboys and Indians

Let's play cowboys and Indians,
except the Indians aren't the bad guys,
and neither are the cowboys.

Let's acknowledge the indigenous tribes
who birthed their children
and honored their dead
on the land our haunted playground is built upon.

Let's try not to harm each other
or kill each other over fun and games.

Let's try to play fair;
winning by deception is the biggest loss of all.

Let's play *Humans*
and learn from each other,
work together to restore the land,
heal the poisoned seas and sky,
mend our costumed psyches.

Who taught us to play otherwise?

Tetherball

it's so easy for you to forgive
yourself and move on
keep speaking to me of sacrifice
with baroque lips of expensive alabaster
your belly stuffed soft with cotton
picked by the ghost of my hand

we are more than
these angles and curves of flesh
we are long-lived spirits
passing our pain along as nourishment

we eat your poison for breakfast
and turn it to gospel for supper

I'm wound around the galvanized steel pole
to my tether's disadvantaged end
and you speak of fresh starts

you know how it goes
when relationships turn sour
apologies mean next to nothing
show me that you care

a bunch of actors holding hands
and singing “Ebony and Ivory”
on a Coca-Cola commercial
won’t heal the psychic wounds

scars never go away
but they may fade over time
if they aren’t torn anew
every century
every decade
every day

Duck, Duck, Goose

duck, duck, goose
the blue devil's noose has come loose

some such fool's gold shovel in hand
digging sandbox spoil doubloons in soiled
Underoos

stranded sandbox sweater
never knew anything better

except an extra sharp cheddar
once owned by Eddy Vedder

these lost treasures somehow now
gathered in the nearby lost and found

tangled in a box for a searching girl, piles
of pearls, jammed in scarves that smell of
dating games

and those old games
the dated ones like dipping madeleine into tea

I drink the sky from my tree
all summer long, not a single bee…

now green acorns fall early from the ancient
curving oak
its deep dry shade the color of smoke

and I'm falling for the long night's tricks
doing whatever I can to get my fix

beneath a glowing full moon and
amber candlewicks
I imagine a new day

a box of broken dreams
smolders at the seams

blue devil screams, "No fair!" off on another wild
goose chase
to recover his prophetic horns, stolen by
the jealous Norns

In the spirit of play, this poem was conceived as a game—a cross between Duck, Duck, Goose and Exquisite Corpse. I "tagged" various poets via social media during the third week of August (2022), asking if they were up for a quick game, stating the rules as follows: "If you're up for it, please just add two lines that rhyme, either with themselves or the preceding line. Try to connect the meaning(s) of your two lines with the meaning(s) of the previous two lines as best you can, but feel free to divert the poem's trajectory if the inspiration should strike you." Here are the players involved in this poem, in order of appearance: J. Martin Strangeweather, Shem Korngold, Amaranta Tlahui Korngold, Rick Lupert, Paul Corman-Roberts, K. R. Morrison, Richard Modiano, Tresha Faye Haefner, Lisa Alvarez, Tim Heerdink, Stacy Russo, Kelliane Parker, and Lance Boyle. Thank you all for taking the time to have a little fun with me.

J. Martin Strangeweather believes having fun is the main objective—playing and exploring, not winning. This might explain why no one ever picks him to be on their team. To play more of his games, check out *Gorb in the Schizocratic Linguiverse* (Strangeweather, 2018), *American Daydream: A Collective Work of Psychic Fiction* (Santa Ana Literary Association, 2021), and *Electric Zen for Neon Koans* (Weird Roach LLC, 2022).